

JOSEPH CONRAD IN THE CONGO




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JOSEPH CONRAD IN THE CONGO

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BY

G. JEAN-AUBRY

"I speak of Africa and golden joys."

Shakespeare

BOSTON
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Joseph Conrad.

*an unpublished photograph
taken before starting for the Congo.*

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ONE of the special characteristics of Joseph Conrad's work, considered as a whole, is that it covers an extraordinarily vast geographical field. No other novelist has portrayed so great a variety of surroundings and so many different types of humanity with an intimate and true knowledge, and that is not the least merit nor the least surprising accomplishment of this great writer.

Thus, Asia and Oceania are the scene of the novels *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Rescue*, *Victory*, *The Shadow Line*, and the short stories "Karain," "The Lagoon," *Lord Jim*, *Youth*, "The End of the Tether," "Typhoon," "The Secret Sharer," "Freya of the Seven Isles," "The Planter of Malata," "Because of the Dollars" and "Falk." Spanish America is the setting for the novels *Nostromo* and *Romance*, and the story "Gaspar Ruiz"; Africa that of the three narratives, "Heart of Darkness," "An Outpost of Progress" and "The Smile of Fortune." Finally, in Europe, England is represented by *The Secret Agent*, "The Return," "Amy Foster," "To-morrow," "The Informer"; Russia by *Under Western Eyes*, and "A Warrior's Soul"; Italy by "Il Conte"; France by the novels *The Arrow of Gold* and *The Rover*, and the stories "The Duel" and "The Idiots"; Spain by that of "The Inn of the Two Witches"; and Poland by "Prince Roman."

This diversity of subjects and settings is not the result of any particular intention, but rather the natural consequence of a life which, owing to singular circumstances, was spent in the four quarters of the globe; a life, when finally dedicated to literature, as it had been for twenty years to the seas, could only

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find food consistent with its work in opening, as Baudelaire says, *les écrins de sa riche mémoire.*"

Until I shall have written a full story of Joseph Conrad's life, I would like to show, by an example, to what extent his life and his work are merged together, how much one is the outcome of the other, how experience of things and of people are responsible for the stirring illusion of real life which pervades all his work; and how, on the other hand, the magnificent personality, penetration and depth of the man, have re-created, enriched and animated his written recollections.

In 1890, Joseph Conrad proceeded to the Congo. Of the three stories coming from his experiences in Africa, "Heart of Darkness" is undoubtedly the most important, both on account of its scope and its artistic qualities. In the "Author's Note" to the volume ⁽¹⁾ containing this story, the following is written:—

"It is well known that curious men go prying into all sorts of places (where they have no business) and come out of them with all kinds of spoil. This story, and one other, not in this volume ⁽²⁾ are all the spoil I brought out from the centre of Africa, where, really, I had no sort of business. More ambitious in its scope and longer in the telling, "Heart of Darkness" is quite as authentic in fundamentals as "Youth." "Heart of Darkness" is experience, too, but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers."

Documents hitherto unpublished enable one to-day to show the truth of these remarks, and to affirm that in "Heart of

⁽¹⁾ *Youth and Other Stories*. "Author's Note," page x. The references are always given to the *Uniform Edition* of the Works of Joseph Conrad. (J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., London.)

⁽²⁾ "An Outpost of Progress," in the volume *Tales of Unrest*.

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Darkness" the adventures which the author lends to Marlow, his mouthpiece, are no other than those of which he himself was at the same time witness and victim during his travels on the Upper Congo River.

What took Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski to the Congo in 1890?

He had already been at sea for fifteen years. First he had served as apprentice on French sailing vessels, from 1875 to 1878: then as sailor, second mate, mate, and finally as master of English ships from 1878 to 1889. Some voyages had taken him to the West Indies and the coast of Mexico, others to Sydney, Samarang, Calcutta, Bangkok and Mauritius. The years 1887 and 1888 had just been spent without revisiting Europe, first of all as mate of a steamship plying between Singapore and the East Coast of Borneo, then as master of a barque which he had piloted from Bangkok to Port Adelaide and Mauritius. ⁽¹⁾

Returning to Europe in May, 1889, he endeavoured to find a fresh command. It was not easy; months passed bringing no success, and the circumstances appear to have been those which he lends to Marlow, the hero of his story: "I had then, as you remember, just returned to London, after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas—a regular dose of the East—six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes. . . . It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship—I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game too." ⁽²⁾

Days, months went by without bringing even the hope of

⁽¹⁾ On the steamship "Vidar" he met Almayer (see *A Personal Record*, page 74 and foll.). On the barque "Otago" occurred the events described in "The Shadow Line" and "A Smile of Fortune."

⁽²⁾ "Heart of Darkness," Chapter I, page 51.

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a command. Captain Korzeniowski wandered around the town, frequently went from Bessborough Gardens, where he was living, as far as the City, either to Camomile Street, the offices of Messrs. Barr, Moering & Co., to see his friend Adolf Krieger, or to the London Shipmasters' Society in Fenchurch Street, where he went to see if the obliging Captain Froud, Secretary to the Society ⁽¹⁾, had been able to discover a job for him.

Days, months went by, summer was nearly over, and still Captain Conrad Korzeniowski only sailed the streets of London "without chart or compass." After having travelled over so many seas this new kind of wandering was not entirely repugnant to his humour of the moment. Until then he seems to have lived from day to day, but—at that moment—was it lassitude, maturity, the great impression produced on him by scenes which he had witnessed, perhaps all these together—this Pole, aged 32, now a Captain and since three years a naturalised Englishman, *began to remember*. Following on the eager and adventurous carelessness of early youth came a period of reflection which with difficulty took shape. These reflections were fed, not on theories and systems, but on the thought of human beings whom he had perhaps met for a moment, caught a glimpse of or guessed at their existence, and the idle leisure of London allowed him to re-create their form, their gestures, their desires, their illusions and disappointments.

One morning in September, "an autumn day with an opaline atmosphere, a veiled semi-opaque, lustrous day . . . one of those London days that have the charm of mysterious amenity, of fascinating softness," Captain Korzeniowski, moved by a sudden, an incomprehensible impulse, in the

⁽¹⁾ With regard to Captain Froud, (see "A Personal Record," page 6 and foll).

furnished apartment at Bessborough Gardens, where he was temporarily living, began to write the story *Almayer's Folly*, in which he evoked a picture of people he had met two years previously on the East Coast of Borneo. The completion of this novel, the first and shortest of all those which Joseph Conrad was to write, was spread over five years: a labour undertaken almost involuntarily, and conducted both with obstinacy and laziness.

If it can be truly said that on that morning of September, 1889, Captain Conrad Korzeniowski had begun to renounce his place to the writer Joseph Conrad, he was far from suspecting it, or even of wishing it. He says so later in *A Personal Record*. "I had never made a note of a fact, of an impression or of an anecdote in my life. The conception of a planned book was entirely outside my mental range when I sat down to write; the ambition of being an author had never turned up amongst these gracious imaginary existences one creates fondly for oneself at times in the stillness and immobility of a day-dream" ⁽¹⁾

However much the misfortunes of Almayer may have haunted Conrad—and that in spite of himself—he remained no less pre-occupied by his own sea career: for fifteen years it had been his means of livelihood—a rather niggardly one, however—and strongly seasoned with danger and risks; and the profits which his year of command of the barque "Otago" had left him were not sufficiently abundant to allow him to consider making a long stay on land. Besides, what would he have done there for any considerable period? He had but few friends in London, no relations, no home; he could scarcely fail to think of departure.

Through the intervention of his friend, Adolf Krieger, and a ship-broker from Ghent, named M. G. C. de

⁽¹⁾ Page 68.

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Baerdemaecker, he had been taken on as super-cargo by Messrs. Walford & Co., of Antwerp, who gave him hope of the command of a ship bound to the West Indies and New Orleans. This command was also slow in materialising.

Captain Korzeniowski was placed in exactly the same situation as that in which he puts Marlow, in the beginning of "Heart of Darkness": "You understand it was a continental concern, that Trading society; but I have a lot of relations living on the Continent, because it is cheap and not so nasty as it looks, they say.

"I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to get things that way, you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself; but then—you see—I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said, "My dear fellow," and did nothing. Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc., etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy." ⁽¹⁾

As a matter of fact, Joseph Conrad did have an aunt by marriage who lived in Brussels, Madame Marguerite Poradowska, a Frenchwoman married to a Pole, who was beginning to be known as a writer. Her first novel, *Yaya*, a sketch on Ruthanian customs, had just been published in 1887 in "La Revue des Deux Mondes." Later she published, in the

(1) "Heart of Darkness," Chapter I, page 53.

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same review, *Demoiselle Missia*, *Les Filles du Pope*, *Marylka*, and several Polish translations. It was through this aunt—exactly as Marlow relates it—that Conrad was given an appointment to sail, not towards the West Indies, which had been the scene of his early manhood—but to the very heart of Africa.

This event saw the realisation in an unexpected way of a desire he had had as a child. Many years previously, when quite a small boy, he had declared that he would go to this part of the world; then he had quite forgotten his dream:—

“It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now:—

“‘When I grow up I shall go *there*.’

“And of course I thought no more about it till after a quarter of a century or so an opportunity offered to go there—as if the sin of childish audacity was to be visited on my mature head.” (1)

Perhaps, as Marlow says, a map of the Congo seen in a Fleet Street window, revived the wish of his childhood; but it also

(1) *A Personal Record*, page 13.

The following identical passage which Conrad makes Marlow say will be sufficient to show the extent the writer and his “character” are one in this story: “Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there . . .’ But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.” (“Heart of Darkness,” page 51).

See also *Last Essays*, “Geography and Some Explorers,” page 24.

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must not be forgotten that in 1889 the Congo was a burning question.

Africa had been the topic of the day since September, 1875, when King Leopold II, cleverly blending commercial designs with philanthropic objects, had, with the support of the Great Powers, founded the Association Internationale pour la Civilisation de l'Afrique Centrale. Stanley's expedition from Zanzibar to the Lower Congo (1876-1878) had aroused both the most ardent interest and the greediest passions. Scarcely even a few months previously, on September 17th, 1889, Stanley, renewing the exploits he accomplished at the time he hunted for Livingstone, reached and found Emin Pacha at the camp of Kavali. The intellectual, journalistic, political and commercial elements of Europe followed these search parties with passionate attention. Brussels had become the home of adventure; breaknecks of the entire world, as well as missionaries, met there in a body; honest men as well as adventurers came there to enter into engagements which would allow them to use their talents, faith, strength, greed, violence, or even their naïveté, in the heart of that which Stanley calls "The Dark Continent."⁽¹⁾ It was the very moment when England and Belgium were preparing to receive Stanley as a hero.⁽²⁾

This atmosphere of adventure and conquests could not fail to impress the imagination of Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski, in whose veins ran the inheritance of an adventurous Pole, and in whom the feeling of romance writing had just been stirred. He suddenly made up his mind to go and command

(1) *Through the Dark Continent* (1878). 4 volumes, in which Stanley gives an account of his expeditions of 1874-78 to the source of the Nile, around Lakes Alexandra and Victoria Nyanza, and his descent of the Congo River from Tanganyika to the Atlantic Ocean.

(2) From April 19th-26th, 1890, Stanley was received at Brussels and at Antwerp by the King and the enthusiastic Belgian people.

a steamer on the Congo. In Brussels, London and Ghent, efforts were made to obtain the desired command for the young man. On September 24th, 1889, M. de Baerdemaecker, ship-broker at Ghent, wrote to Captain Albert Thys, at that time Orderly Officer to King Leopold II, and Managing Director of the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo," the following letter :—

Ghent, September 24th, 1889.

I avail myself of our business relations at the time of the Cie Gantoise to ask if you could employ, either in the service of the State, or that of the Cie du Commerce, or one of its branches, an English Captain, Korzeniowsky (sic) who is now in London and who wishes to take up service in the Congo. This gentleman has been very highly recommended to me by friends in London, and possesses excellent testimonials : his general education is superior to that of the majority of sailors, and he is a perfect gentleman.

If you think you can do something for him I will advise him to call on you if you will kindly suggest a place and time.

Thanking you in anticipation, I am, etc.

On the back of this letter a pencil note in the handwriting of M. Albert Thys, shows the answer which was made almost a month later :—

"Tell him that I was away, have just returned, and that if the Captain is still free, I am ready to see him, and if he suits us, to engage him. It must be understood that a steamer captain is under discussion. He should be able to speak a little French." (1)

(1) This document and the following ones were found in the file of Korzeniowski, preserved from destruction by a miracle, and was very kindly communicated to me by the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. The originals are in French.

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Although by choice he would have spent nearly his whole career on board sailing vessels, two years before Captain Korzeniowski had been mate of a steamer; as for French, he had spoken it fluently since his childhood. M. de Baerdemaccker hastened to communicate this answer to him through Messrs. Barr, Moering & Co., of London, and already, on October 31st, these gentlemen informed M. Albert Thys that their Captain would be in Brussels the following day in order to call on him and find out if it would be possible for him to obtain command of one of the steamers of the Société du Haut-Congo.

At that time, this firm—which still exists to-day and has been considerably enlarged—had been only recently founded. Its starting point had been the Sandford Exploring Society, constituted at Brussels on June 20th, 1886, on the initiative of the American General Sandford, former Minister of the United States in Belgium, and who died shortly after, in 1891. A transformation of this Society, and the help given by the Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie were the elements responsible for the formation of the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, on December 10th, 1888.

This commercial enterprise, led by clever and energetic men, was extending its activities. The opening of new centres and the construction of new steamers were under consideration; plans were being studied, together with the possible territory for a railhead, which, from Matadi to Stanley Pool, would form a rapid means of communication between the two navigable parts of the Congo River. Vast perspectives were open to adventurous activity.

The Director of the Société du Haut-Congo, after his interview with Captain Korzeniowski, who had made a good impression on him, hastened to write for information to Messrs. Walford & Co., of Antwerp, who answered him on

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November 15th: "The person about whom you ask for information was attached to our service as super-cargo, and all we know of him is that he was recommended to us by M. de Baerdemaecker, of Ghent, but he has not been employed because he hoped to be taken on by you. We are communicating your letter to the former, asking him to reply to us by return of post."

Meanwhile, Messrs. Barr, Moering & Co., of London, informed M. de Baerdemaecker that Messrs. Walford & Co. had undoubtedly made promises to Captain Korzeniowski, but that they appeared to quibble over the material conditions of the contract; in fact, as soon as Captain Korzeniowski had seen that M. Albert Thys was disposed to employ him, he hastened to obtain permission from Messrs. Walford to go again to Brussels. In order to back the candidature of their friend, Messrs. Barr, Moering & Co., reminded the ship-broker at Ghent of the titles and merits of Mr. Conrad Korzeniowski, "as to general character we know him as of highest excellence and to be well connected; he is rather a young man, a good scholar, and generally accomplished, apart from his professional training." (1)

Immediately on the day following his visit to the Manager of the Société du Haut-Congo Conrad wrote the following letter:—

Novembre 4, 1889,
Londres.

Monsieur,—J'ai l'honneur de vous apprendre que j'ai renoncé à faire le voyage du Mexique et aux Indes Occidentales au service de M.M. Walford et Cie.—naturellement avec la permission de ces Messieurs.

Je pense que, vu mon séjour prolongé aux pays chauds (d'où je viens de retourner maintenant), et mon probable départ pour l'Afrique dans

(1) Letter dated "London, Nov. 19th, 1889."

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peu de mois, il serait prudent de profiter du climat européen le plus longtemps possible.

Je m'empresse de vous prévenir de ce changement dans mes projets, car je considère qu'il est de mon devoir à présent de vous tenir au courant de mes mouvements.

Les lettres à l'adresse ci-dessous me parviendront sans délai.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, Monsieur l'Administrateur, avec la plus haute considération votre très obéissant serviteur.

Conrad Korzeniowski.

*c/o Messrs. Barr, Moering & Co.,
36 Camomile Street, London, E.C.*

A pencil note, scribbled on the letter itself by the Director, informs us of the impression produced by this visit: "Good Captain for when we shall need one for the Haut-Congo. Ask for information." Some confusion having arisen in the mind of M. Albert Thys of the relationship between the Captain and Messrs. Walford, of Antwerp, Joseph Conrad wrote to him again on November 28th:—

Monsieur,

Je viens d'apprendre par une lettre de M. de Baerdemaecker a MM. Barr, Moering et Cie. que vous étiez dans l'idée que j'avais servi M. Walford comme capitaine d'un de ses navires.

Je me hâte de m'excuser envers vous pour m'être exprimé si mal dans l'entrevue que vous avez bien voulu m'accorder à Bruxelles. Mon intention était de vous informer que j'étais dans l'emploi de M. Walford pour le moment: j'ignorais même qu'il fut un armateur. J'ose espérer que vous m'accorderez votre indulgence pour ce malentendu, causé simplement par mon manque d'habitude à m'exprimer en français. ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ It is probable that Conrad had not had any occasion for a long time to write in French; it is noticeable that the language he uses, however correct it may be, is not nearly as sure and elegantly personal as that which he uses in the French letters written to various friends during the last ten or fifteen years of his life.

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Comme sans doute il s'agirait de mes qualifications pour le poste que vous avez eu la bonté de me promettre, je prends la liberté de vous informer que je possède une comission (sic) du "Board of Trade" me qualifiant absolument pour commander des navires à voile et à vapeur dans la marine britannique (obtenu par examen à Londres, 1885).⁽¹⁾

Je suis prêt à produire des copies des certificats signés par les Capitaines et armateurs qui m'ont employé pendant mes 15 ans de service sur mer, témoignant de mon habileté en matières du métier et de ma bonne conduite en général.

Je suis aussi—depuis 4 ans—membre de la Société des Capitaines ("Shipmaster's Association," London, 60 Fenchurch Street) où mon état de service est naturellement connu.

G. F. W. Hope, Esq., Director of the South African Mercantile Co., member London Chamber of Commerce, 39 Coleman Street, vous donnera toute information à mon sujet que vous jugerez nécessaire de lui demander.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, Monsieur l'Administrateur, avec la plus haute considération.

C. Korzeniowski.

But the hoped-for command of a steamer on the Upper Congo River is also long in coming, and, in the meantime, Joseph Conrad receives an invitation from his uncle, Thadée Bobrowski, who lives in Southern Poland, to come and spend some time with him. This Uncle Thadée, Conrad's mother's brother, is the member of the family to whom at all times he has been the most attached. At the death of his father, in 1869, it was Thadée Bobrowski who took charge of the twelve-year-old orphan, who facilitated the pursuance of his studies, and that of his sea career, when the child showed an obstinate inclination for that kind of life. The small pension which his

⁽¹⁾ This certificate was obtained on November 11, 1886. Conrad, who had for persons and landscapes an incomparable memory, nearly always makes an error of dates in questions relating to his own life.

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uncle secured for him and the care which he took of this meagre patrimony, bequeathed to the orphan by relations, enabled him to surmount the difficult stages of his career. During fifteen years uncle and nephew did not cease to correspond. ⁽¹⁾

The uncle is growing old; at least, so he complains, although he is not yet sixty years. Six years have elapsed since he saw his nephew, and it is sixteen years since the latter set foot on the territory of ancient Poland, now under Russia. At the beginning of the year the uncle wrote to his nephew, then at Port Adelaide (January 3rd, 1889), that he hoped he might once again "see his dear captain." He informed him of the favourable provisions he had just made for him in his will. All this seems of bad augury to Captain Korzeniowski, whose affection strongly urges him to satisfy this prolonged expectancy, and on December 27th he informs M. Thys of the invitation he has received, and "which it would give him much pleasure to accept," but which requires a certain amount of time, since

(1) I have in my care nearly 80 letters from Thadée Bobrowski to Joseph Conrad, written (in Polish, it goes without saying) from 1876 to 1893, that is to say, precisely the period of the maritime career of the author. It is evident that several letters from uncle to nephew have gone astray, either during the travels of the latter, or later, for, curiously enough, precisely the two letters to which Joseph Conrad alludes in *A Personal Record* are missing, and he would appear to have had them when he wrote this book in 1908-9. As regards the letters of Joseph Conrad to his uncle, letters which, from information received, must have amounted to more than a hundred, we have unfortunately not yet found them, and it seems very unlikely that they will ever be found. They still existed in 1914. But the region of Kazimierowka, where successively Thadée Bobrowski (until his death in January, 1894) and his heirs lived, was the scene of Bolshevik extortions and destruction. I remember Joseph Conrad telling me in 1919 that nothing remained of his uncle's house where he had visited him in 1890 and 1893. It must therefore be deplored that we cannot see the letters which would have been incomparable documents for studying the formation of character of the great writer, and reflecting the impressions made by his sea life.

27 Dec^{bre} 1889. Louvain.

Monsieur l'Administrateur-Délégué.
Société Belge du Haut-Longo.

Monsieur.

Je viens de recevoir une invitation de la part d'un de mes parents pour passer quelque temps dans ses terres dans le Sud de la Russie.

Il me paraît très agréable de l'accepter, mais avant de décider j'aimerais à savoir précisément le temps dont je pourrais disposer. —

Les communications dans ce pays sont assez difficiles en hiver, et souvent même le télégraphe ne fonctionne pas régulièrement. D'un autre côté une courte visite ne vaudrait pas la peine et les dépenses du déplacement.

Dans ces circonstances j'ose m'adresser à vous, dans l'espérance que vous voudrez bien me

faire la faveur de m'informez
(à peu près) de la date où vous aurez
besoin de mes services. Je pourrai
alors prendre mes mesures pour
révenir à Londres ponctuellement et
je me tiendrai à votre disposition. -

Veuillez Monsieur accepter
d'avance mes remerciements pour
la réponse, ainsi que mes excuses
très sincères pour occuper ainsi
votre temps.

J'ai l'honneur d'être
Monsieur l'Administrateur,
avec la plus haute considération,
Votre très obéissant serviteur

J.C. Kozienowski.

Mr. Messrs. Barr, Mearns & Co.
36 Cannon Street. London. E.C.

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a short visit would not be worth the trouble and travelling expense, and he hopes that the Director of the Société du Haut-Congo would kindly let him know the date on which he will need his services, so that he may make the necessary arrangements for returning to London in time to be at his service :—

27 Décembre, 1889,
Londres.

Monsieur L'Administrateur-Délégué,
Société Belge du Haut-Congo.

Monsieur,

Je viens de recevoir une invitation de la part d'un de mes parents pour passer quelque temps dans ses terres dans le Sud de la Russie.

Il me serait très agréable de l'accepter, mais avant de décider j'aimerais à savoir précisément le temps dont je pourrais disposer.

Les communications dans ce pays sont assez difficiles en hiver, et souvent même le télégraphe ne fonctionne pas régulièrement. D'un autre côté une courte visite ne vaudrait pas la peine et les dépenses du déplacement.

Dans ces circonstances j'ose m'adresser à vous, dans l'espoir que vous voudrez bien me faire la faveur de m'informer (à peu près) de la date où vous aurez besoin de mes services. Je pourrais alors prendre mes mesures pour revenir à Londres ponctuellement où je me tiendrai à votre disposition.

Veuillez, Monsieur, accepter d'avance mes remerciements pour la réponse, ainsi que mes excuses très sincères pour occuper ainsi votre temps.

J'ai l'honneur d'être Monsieur l'Administrateur, avec la plus haute considération,

Votre très obéissant serviteur,

J. C. Korzeniowski.

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The answer which was sent to him by return⁽¹⁾ must have given him to foresee still a considerable delay, for he decided to leave for the Ukraine a few weeks later. He stopped at Brussels on February 5th, both to see his aunt Poradowska, to whom he gave the care of watching over his interests, and in order to have an interview with the Secretary of the Société du Haut-Congo; then he continued his journey, and, on February 16th, 1890, ⁽²⁾ arrived at his uncle's at Kazimierowka, in the Polish Ukraine.

He remained nearly two months; it was the first time he had returned to Poland since 1874. Old friends are very anxious to see the traveller again, this Pole who had become a sailor. He himself is moved by the return to his distant country and the feeling of home which he has not known for sixteen years. However, he does not lose sight of his intention to proceed to the Congo, and on April 11th he writes, from the house of his uncle, in Kazimierowka, to the Director of the Société du Haut-Congo, informing him that he will be in Brussels latest on the 30th of that month, and that he will present himself without loss of time at the offices of the firm, so that he may hear the decision taken concerning him ⁽³⁾ :—

Monsieur Alb. Thys,
A Bruxelles.

11 Avril, 1890,
terre de Kazimierowka.

Monsieur l'Administrateur,

Je viens d'être avisé par mes agents que votre lettre à mon adresse (sic) à Londres a été réexpédiée, après moi pour la Russie—selon mes

⁽¹⁾ The letter in fact contains this pencil note : *Rep. 31 Xbre 89.*

⁽²⁾ This date has been obtained from a manuscript document in the writing of Thadée Bobrowski, entitled : "For the instruction of my dear nephew, Konrad Korzeniowski."

⁽³⁾ Letter from Joseph Conrad, figuring in the Korzeniowski file, and which was communicated to me by the Société du Haut-Congo.

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instructions. Je croyais avoir pris toutes les précautions possibles au sujet de ma correspondance ; malheureusement il paraît que cette lettre est égarée ou peut-être est-elle absolument perdue ? J'ai réclamé au bureau des Postes de la Province, mais jusqu'à présent sans aucun succès.

J'ignore donc le contenu de la communication dont vous m'avez honoré, mais j'ose espérer que—si elle contenait une décision favorable à ma candidature—le regrettable accident de sa perte ne me portera aucun préjudice.

Comme j'ai informé Monsieur le Secrétaire de la Compagnie durant l'entrevue qu'il a bien voulu m'accorder le 5 février, je serai de retour vers la fin du mois d'avril.

Je serai donc à Bruxelles le 30 de ce mois au plus tard et je me présenterai sans perte de temps aux bureaux de la Société du Haut-Congo, afin d'apprendre votre décision à mon égard.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, Monsieur l'Administrateur, avec la plus haute considération,

*Votre serviteur très obéissant,
J. C. Korzeniowski.*

We know by another letter written to his cousin Zagórski, that he returned *via* Lublin, where he remained several days. He left there on April 22nd, ⁽¹⁾ and on the 26th he was in Brussels, and from that moment the adventure, the prelude of which had been so long, is precipitated. The steps he had taken as far back as September at last show a result. It had needed no less than seven months for him to obtain the command he so much desired of a small steamer on the Congo River.

⁽¹⁾ Letter in Polish from Joseph Conrad to his cousin Charles Zagórski, dated from Sierra Leone, May 22nd, 1890, communicated by the daughter of the addressee, Mademoiselle Aniéla Zagorska).

ON May 2nd he writes to his cousin Marie Tyska, née Bobrowska, from London:—

My dear Mariette,

I have not been able to write sooner. I have been exceedingly busy and I still have much to do. I am sailing for the Congo in three days, and have to prepare for a stay of three years in the middle of Africa, so you will easily understand that every moment is precious. ⁽¹⁾

Turning to “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow gives the following story of his departure for Africa, and reveals the reasons for the sudden eagerness of the Director to engage him as captain:

“I got my appointment—of course—and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven—that was the fellow’s name, a Dane—through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it.

“I flew round like mad to get ready, and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company’s offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire, and make no end of coin by trade.

(1) Beginning of a letter written in Polish, which I owe to the kindness of the addressee.

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"A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. . . . " (1)

Then Marlow continues with the unforgettable recital of his visit to the offices of the Company; the two women dressed in black who endlessly knit in the waiting room like immovable Fates; the large many-coloured map of Central Africa; the momentary interview with the Director; the compassionate Secretary; the visit to the doctor; the farewell to his aunt; a succession of details and scenes admirably drawn, all covered with mordant irony, and bearing the stamp of truth.

Everything leads one to believe that these scenes, which, according to the story, precede the departure of Marlow, really happened as Conrad describes them eight years later. He proceeded to Brussels to the offices of the Company, at that time, 9 rue Brederode, (2) he exchanged a few words and a handshake with Captain Thys, the Managing Director, "pale plumpness in a frock coat," saw the secretary, the doctor, the aunt, and was obliged to leave in a hurry. It is equally exact—as Marlow says—that Captain Korzeniowski obtained his command because one of the captains of the Company had just been killed in the Congo by natives. This Captain was a Dane called Freiesleben, not Fresleven, as Marlow tells us. (3)

(1) "Heart of Darkness," pp. 53, 54, 55.

(2) These offices of the Company are now incorporated in the premises of the "Banque d'Outremer," which stretch from the rue de Namur to the rue Brederode. At 9 rue Brederode a house still exists which seem to correspond to the description given by Joseph Conrad in his story, but it is used for other purposes.

(3) Most of the captains, mechanics and workmen entrusted with the assembling or repairing of steamers of the Upper Congo fleet were at that time Scandinavian.—Freiesleben: see "Mouvement Géographique," Sept. 8th, 1889.

Allusion to this affair is made a year later in the *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*: "Latterly, the only really troubled situation was in the region of Tchumbiri, at Bolobo. In face of the persistent ill-will and acts of aggression culminating in the assassination of the captain of one of the steamers of the Société du Haut-Congo, over a year ago, it has been necessary to make an example. The security of the white man demands that outrages of this kind be vigorously repressed. ⁽¹⁾

Joseph Conrad, like Marlow, had not much leisure time to spend in effusive good-byes. On May 2nd he was in London, on the 7th he signed his contract in Brussels, ⁽²⁾ and on the 19th he embarked at Bordeaux for Matadi. This last information is furnished by the *Mouvement Géographique*, a small weekly review which then appeared at Brussels, and which seems to have been the official organ of the Independent State and of the commercial Companies of Belgian Congo. In the number of May 4th, 1890, can be read:—" 'La Ville de Maceio,' of the Cie Française des Chargeurs Réunis, of Le Havre, left Antwerp on April 30th, after taking on board 715 tons of merchandise for Boma and Matadi.

" 'La Ville de Maceio' will put in at Bordeaux, where M. Harou, former agent of the State Public Service, and M. Korzeniowski, steamer captain, who are leaving for Africa on behalf of the *Société du Haut-Congo*, will embark." ⁽³⁾

⁽¹⁾ Report to the King (*Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, juillet, 1891).

⁽²⁾ A note taken from the register of the Société du Haut-Congo, handed to me by them, says: "Conrad Korzeniowski, bachelor, born December 3rd, 1857, at Jitomir (Russian Poland). Engaged as steamer captain May 7th, 1890. Left Bordeaux for Matadi May 10th, 1890. Arrived at Matadi June 10th, 1890." This last date is obviously incorrect. He only reached Matadi on June 13th.

⁽³⁾ *Mouvement Géographique*, Brussels: P. Weissenbruch, Printer to the King, 45 rue du Poinçon. This weekly paper, edited by A. J. Wauters, had appeared since 1883. In 1891, this same A. J. Wauters started another

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Concerning the journey from Bordeaux to Boma, "Heart of Darkness" gives details and impressions which equally correspond to the reality: "I left in a French steamer," says Marlow, "and she called in every blamed port they have out there, for, as far as I could see, the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom house officers. . . . We passed various places—trading places—with names like Grand Bassam, Little Popo, names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister black cloth. . . . Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. . . . It was upward of thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We anchored off the seat of the government. But my work would not begin till some two hundred miles further on. So as soon as I could I made a start for a place thirty miles higher up." (1)

Joseph Conrad sailed on the "Ville de Maceio," which called first at Teneriffe, then at Dakar, Conakry, Sierra-Leone, Grand Bassam, Kotonou, Libreville, Loanga, Banana (at the mouth of the great river), and Boma, seat of the Government of the Independent State of the Congo since 1886. (2) His mission

publication, called *Le Congo Illustré*, the object of which was to make known, by illustrations, the colonial work carried out by Belgians in Africa. A note at the head of the first number contains the following: "Whilst the *Mouvement Géographique* will continue to be more especially a paper of news and information, the *Congo Illustré* will complete it by giving an account of unpublished journeys, illustrated by a review of the life, customs, habits and industries in the Congo." The information furnished by the *Mouvement Géographique* on the departure of Captain Korzeniowski for the Congo did not pass unnoticed in Poland. I found a reference to it in Thadée Bobrowski's letter of July 22nd, 1890, to his nephew.

(1) "Heart of Darkness," pp. 60, 61, 62.

(2) This information is taken from the record on the 25th journey of the "Ville de Maceio," kindly supplied me by the *Cie des Chargeurs Réunis*, Le Havre.

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was only to commence some two hundred miles further, at Stanley Pool, and he was obliged to ascend the river from Boma to Matadi, about fifty miles, as a passenger. (As regards the French man-of-war firing into the bush and the war which the French were carrying on in these parts, these are also not details that he invented; the time at which Conrad, in the course of this journey, moved along the coast of West Africa, was precisely that of the beginning of the Dahomey campaign.)

As a travelling companion he had M. Harou, whom we shall meet again; perhaps it was through him that he learnt how little engaging were the prospects of a stay in the Congo, in spite of official statistics. This Belgian officer, who had made tours to the Independent State, knew its risks and put the young English captain wise to the true state of affairs. The undertaking appeared in rather a dark light, and these revelations were not without casting a shadow over the journey. In any event, it is apparent—through Marlow—that Conrad's recollections of this journey were disagreeable. He employed part of the time in writing letters; by the answer from his uncle, Thadée Bobrowski, we know that he wrote the latter from Teneriffe and Banana. We unfortunately do not possess these letters, which it would have been so interesting to be able to compare with the description of the journeys, as given in "Heart of Darkness," but we have the one, in Polish, from Sierra Leone, dated May 22nd, 1890, and addressed to his cousin, Charles Zagórski, of which I will quote certain passages in order to give an idea of the young captain's humour at that moment. It will be seen that he tries to put a bold face on bad luck.

"Freetown (Sierra Leone),
May 22nd, 1890.

My very dear Charles,

It is just a month to-day since you were scandalised by my hasty departure from Lublin. From the date and heading of this

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letter you will see that it was necessary for me to hurry. It is only now that I can breathe more calmly. If you knew what a devilish chase I had. From London to Brussels and back again to London! And again to Brussels. If you had seen all the iron boxes and the revolvers, the big boots and the emotions—another handshake and another pair of trousers!—and if you knew how many bottles of medicine and how many affectionate wishes I bring away with me, you would understand in what a typhoon, cyclone, hurricane, earthquake—no! in what a complete cataclysm—in what a fantastic atmosphere of shopping, business and sentimental emotions I passed two entire weeks I shall no doubt be at Boma on the 7th of this month, and I shall leave Boma with my convoy to go to Leopoldville.⁽¹⁾ So far as I can gather from my letter of appointment, I am to command a steamer belonging to the exploring expedition of M. Delcommune, now under preparation. This prospect pleases me greatly, but I know nothing for certain, because all that is kept, so to speak, secret. (That which makes me rather uneasy is the information that 60 per cent. of the employees of our company return to Europe without even remaining six months. . . . There are others who are sent back at the end of a year in order that they should not die in the Congo. Heaven preserve us! That would spoil the statistics, which are excellent, you understand. Briefly, it appears that there are only 7 per cent. who are able to stay their three years of service.) . . . Yes, but a Polish gentleman, covered with British tar! What a shame it will be! In any case, I can console myself with the thought that—faithful to national traditions—it is of my own free will that I am landed here.”⁽²⁾

One sees by this that Joseph Conrad was no longer unaware of the risks of the adventure, which had certainly not been

⁽¹⁾ In the Stanley-Pool district, where he was to take command of the vessel intended for him.

⁽²⁾ Letter in Polish imparted to me by the daughter of the addressee, Mademoiselle Aniela Zagorska. Contrary to the information Joseph Conrad gives in this letter, he only arrived at Boma on the evening of June 12th.

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exposed to him at Brussels before his departure, but, backed by the British tar, the Polish gentleman held firm. From the depths of Poland his dear uncle, Thadée, wrote his nephew a little later, on June 24th :—

I follow you in thought across the distance and wonder what is happening to you. I suppose that if you have not yet been put on the spit and eaten roasted (or as a ragout) I shall receive an answer sooner or later. . . . Your last letter is dated from Teneriffe, and from my calculations you must now be at Leopoldville. ⁽¹⁾ Without waiting to come to a conclusion about people and things, and this question of a civilising mission of which, after all, you are one of the wheels, and to give your opinion of it all; without waiting to crystallise all that in words, tell me quickly how you are and what were your first impressions.

And he ends another letter almost in the identical terms used by his nephew, but with less philosophy and confidence :—

Your letter of May 28th was from Libreville : it therefore took seven weeks. You wrote it on the frontier between civilisation and savagery. What must I expect if you continue into the very depths of Africa, where the post only arrives once a month. . . . The only consolation that you may find, and the only chance of increasing your perseverance and optimism in the present fight for life, is in thinking of the celebrated words of Moliere, " Tu l'as voulu, tu l'as voulu, George Dandin ! " As for me, I shall not count the days and weeks which separate us with less impatience, wondering if my carcass can hold out till then. ⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ On June 24th Joseph Conrad was still at Matadi, as is proved by the Congo Diary (see " Last Essays," p. 239).

⁽²⁾ These two letters—the second is dated July 22nd, 1890—form part of the bundle of letters from Thadée Bobrowski to his nephew, written between 1876 and 1890, and which were found among the papers of the great writer.

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It was barely a few months previously that, for the first time, a 2,000 ton steamer, the "Lualaba," from Liverpool, commanded by Captain John Murray, had dared to pass through the fifty miles which separate Boma from Matadi. This exploit was repeated at the end of 1890 by ships of the same Liverpool company, the ss. "Kisembo" and "Akasa," but "La Ville de Maceio" only landed our passenger at Boma. He was obliged to re-embark on a little steamer which took him to Matadi, terminating point of navigation on the Lower Congo. As a matter of fact, above Matadi, for a distance of about 300 kilometres, the river is represented by a succession of thirty-two unpassable rapids. ⁽¹⁾ It is very probable that this part of the journey took place as Marlow relates it in "Heart of Darkness," and that it was then Conrad became acquainted with the Swedish captain of whom he speaks in his story. ⁽²⁾

Count Max de Pourtales, a traveller who made the Boma-Matadi journey some years previously, in 1884, gave his impressions in a letter which savours of a pre-Conradian quality: "From the boat the view of Boma is charming. But as one ascends the Congo River, the mountainous shores remind one of the Rhine, with this difference, that the aspect of the former is one of desolation on account of the native custom to set fire at this season (dry season, middle of May to end of September) to the gramineous plants, nearly four metres in height. . . . Imagine a whole country of mountains blackened by fire, enormous calcinated rocks, and you will

⁽¹⁾ Stanley: *The Dark Continent*, Vol. IV, p. 35 and foll. It was by surmounting or by trying to coast the cataracts that Stanley, in June-July, 1877, lost eleven men and his companion, Francis John Pocock, drowned one after another.

⁽²⁾ "Heart of Darkness," p. 62. It is possible that the Swedish captain furnished Conrad with some of the features of Heyst, the Swedish hero in "Victory."

understand the terrifying beauty of this land. . . . A leaden atmosphere surrounds one, rendered more overpowering still by the heat which radiates from the funnel of our little steamer. In the river, two or three small island rocks without any vegetation, beyond the trunks of one or two dead trees, turning a naked branch towards heaven, as if twisted by suffering and despair. On the steep banks, monstrous crocodiles, and sometimes, on the slope of a rock, the silhouette of a nigger, squatting motionless, watching our boat without a movement, and as if turned to stone. Over all this is diffused that indefinable and mysterious something which characterises Africa." (1)

Arriving here, his impression could hardly have been favourable. Matadi, in 1891, was already a relatively important post, since it contained 170 Europeans, but the accommodation was still very provisional. One English, one Portuguese, one Dutch and one French factory were in existence, without counting the establishment of the Sandford Exploring Expedition which had just been taken over by the Société du Haut-Congo. (2)

That which gave Matadi a new animation, and by which it was destined to grow rapidly in importance (3) was the fact that the initial work in connection with the railroad between Matadi and Kinchassa had just been started; a line designed to unite the two navigable branches of the Congo River and to allow of a more rapid conveyance of merchandise than by

(1) Quoted in Camille Coquilhat *Sur le Haut Congo*, p. 34 (Paris, J. Lebègue & Co.). It is not impossible that Conrad read this book, which appeared in 1888, hence before his departure for the Congo.

(2) See Report of the Council of Administration, Ste. An. Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, dated October, 19th, 1890.

(3) The following year, Matadi numbered 275 Europeans and 7,800 natives. A photograph will be found of Matadi in 1890 in the *Congo Illustré* (Aug. 27th, 1893), and another one of Matadi and the sight over the River Congo in the same magazine (Jan. 17th, 1892).

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caravan trails and the backs of carriers, the only means of transport, at that time, from the Upper Congo to the embarkation ports.

Between Matadi and Stanley Pool, to the south of the road still used by caravans to-day, stretched a practically unknown country, parts of which only had recently been mapped. A short time previously, the Compagnie du Congo, naturally desirous of finding a way to connect up Matadi with Stanley Pool by means of a railway, had placed (in 1887) a group of engineers and escort at the disposal of Captain Cambier, who had given proof of his activity while Agent of the Association Internationale Africaine at Zanzibar. Captain Cambier was held up for some time by the gorges of the M'pozo and the Palaballa range, but in spite of the difficulties, he had successfully carried out the undertaking. When Joseph Conrad arrived in Africa the construction of the line was being planned under the direction of the Belgian engineer, Hector Charmanne, and the work was still at its initial stage.⁽¹⁾ It is therefore quite exact when Conrad makes Marlow say: "I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. . . . I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails. . . . A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. They were building a railway."⁽²⁾

His stay at Matadi hardly offered Conrad any enjoyment.

⁽¹⁾ This, in fact, was not the least difficult stage. Two years later (end of 1892) the railway only measured 30 kiloms. The constitution of the *Société du Chemin de Fer du Congo* only dated back to July 31st, 1889, and its statutes did not appear on the *Bulletin Officiel de l'État Ind. du Congo* until October, 1889.

⁽²⁾ "Heart of Darkness," pp. 63-64.

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The aspect of the Congo in this district is that of a lake surrounded on all sides by high mountains. Its course is particularly gentle, and is spread over a surface of nearly 1,200 metres. Nature is not particularly pleasing there, judging from a description by Captain Thys, the same man with whom Conrad had a short and laconic interview before leaving Brussels, and who was already very well informed, having explored the region a short time previously. "Arriving at Matadi," he wrote, "is to imagine oneself facing a country that has been cursed, truly a barrier which would seem to have been created by nature to stop progress." ⁽¹⁾

Joseph Conrad cared little enough about the advancement of progress—or that which goes by the name. He already entertained doubts on the subject, to which we owe "An Outpost of Progress" as well as "Heart of Darkness." (His stay at Matadi seemed to him interminable, and it is indeed he who speaks through Marlow when the latter says: "I had to wait in the station (Matadi) for ten days—an eternity!" As a matter of fact, it was a whole fifteen days, not ten, that Conrad remained at Matadi before being able to set out on the 200 and some kilometres which were to lead him to the place where his ship awaited him.)

We know nothing of the Chief Accountant of the Company at Matadi, whose accounts, Marlow says, were kept in as good an order as his collars, vast cuffs and brushed hair, but the picture Conrad draws is so alive that it seemingly must have been the portrait of a real person, and it is equally probable that it was from this accountant Conrad first heard the name mentioned of that distant and mysterious man who was to become the hero of "Heart of Darkness," that Kurtz of whom we shall speak later.

We at least have one sentence from Conrad himself on his

⁽¹⁾ *Au Congo et au Kassai*, by Captain Thys (Brussels, Weissenbruch, ed. 1888).

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stay at Matadi, which says much for the impression the people made on him even in the first days of his enforced stay : " Feel considerably in doubt about the future. Think just now that my life amongst the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable. Intend avoid acquaintance as much as possible." We find this sentence at the beginning of a particularly interesting document, the diary which Joseph Conrad kept from June 13th to August 1st, 1890, that is to say, during the time of his stay at Matadi and his journey, by land, from Matadi to Kinchassa. This document is all the more curious because it is nearly the only one of its kind in the life of Conrad. The future great writer never made the smallest note of scenery, facts or people, that he happened to meet during his sea life, with two exceptions—one, in February, 1888, when he took command at Bangkok of the barque " Otago " at a rather desperate juncture ; the other, during this expedition to the Congo.

In writing later *The Shadow Line* (1916), in which he relates the episode of taking command of the " Otago," Joseph Conrad borrowed—as one can see in the story—from a diary which he probably then destroyed. But it is curious to notice that on this occasion he makes a most clear allusion to the " Congo Diary," which seems to have escaped the notice, up to now, of historians of Conrad's work. The allusion is in the following paragraph :—

" It's the only period of my life in which I attempted to keep a diary No, not the only one. Years later, in conditions of moral isolation, I did put down on paper the thoughts and events of a score of days. But this was the first time. I don't remember how it came about, or how the pocket-book and the pencil came into my hands. . . . Strangely enough, in both cases I took to that sort of thing in circumstances in which I did not expect, in colloquial phrase, ' to come out of it.' Neither could I expect the record to outlast me. This shows

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that it was purely a personal need for intimate relief and not a call of egotism." (1)

The "Diary" which Joseph Conrad kept during his stay at Matadi, and his journey from Matadi to Kinchassa, has been recently published. It is the first of two small penny note-books, the second of which contains a technical report on the navigation of the Congo River from Stanley Pool onward. The former figures to-day amongst the works of the writer, in the posthumous volume *Last Essays* under the name "Congo Diary," and contains valuable information, not only on account of the light it throws on this part of the expedition and the people whom Conrad met at that time, but also because one finds some notes there which evidently furnished the matter for certain passages in "Heart of Darkness."

Arriving at Matadi on June 13th, 1890, at the station of the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, Conrad first made the acquaintance of the chief of the station, Mr. Gosse, formerly sub-lieutenant in the Belgian Army, and who died six months later, and also of another person, destined to singular notoriety, Mr. (later Sir) Roger Casement. At that time Roger Casement was in the service of the Société du Haut-Congo. (2) He was one of the rare people in Africa

(1) "The Shadow Line," p. 106.

(2) "Mr. Casement, former Agent for the State, actually in the service of the Société du Haut-Congo, will embark on the ss. 'Kisembo' (of Liverpool), which leaves Antwerp May 10th." ("Mouvement Géographique," May 4th, 1890.)

Roger Casement was 26 years old at that time. He was beginning his African career, which led him later into service in the Niger Coast Protectorate, in 1892, and to become H.M.'s Consul in Lourenco-Marquez, in June, 1895, Consul to the Portuguese West Africa in 1898, then in Cape Town during the South African War, and in the French Congo. After June, 1905, leaving Africa for South America, he was appointed Consul and Consul General in Sao Paulo and Rio. (See L. G. Redmond. Hoard, "Sir Roger Casement," Hodges, Fidgis & Co., Dublin, 1916.)

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who made a good impression on Conrad. "Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent, and very sympathetic," he notes shortly after his arrival at Matadi, and on June 28th, at the moment of leaving, he writes: "Parted with Casement in a very friendly manner." We found an allusion to this meeting among Conrad's letters. Thirteen years later, on December 26th, 1903, Conrad wrote to Mr. Cunningham Graham:—

I send two letters I had from a man called Casement, premising that I knew him first in the Congo just twelve years ago. Perhaps you've heard or seen in print his name. He's a protestant Irishman, pious. But so was Pizarro. For the rest I can assure you that he is a limpid personality. There is a touch of the conquistador in him, for I've seen him start off into an unspeakable wilderness swinging a crook handled stick for all weapons, with two bull-dogs, Paddy (white) and Biddy (brindle) at his heels, and a Loanda boy carrying a bundle for all company. A few months afterwards it so happened that I saw him come out again, a little leaner, a little browner, with his stick, dogs and Loanda boy, and quietly serene as though he had been for a stroll in the park. Then we lost sight of each other. He was, I believe, British Consul in Beira, and lately seems to have been sent to the Congo again, on sort of mission, by the British Government.

I have always thought that some particle of Las Casas' soul has found refuge in his indefatigable body. The letters will tell you the rest. I would help him, but it is not in me. I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories, and not even up to that miserable game; but your good pen, keen, flexible and straight, and sure like a good Toledo blade, would tell in the fray if you felt disposed to give a slash or two. He could tell you things! Things I've tried to forget, things I never did know. He has had as many years of Africa as I had months—almost.

These meetings with Mr. Gosse and Mr. Casement were interrupted on June 24th by their departure for Boma, where they were to accompany a load of ivory. The same day Conrad shows by his journal that he spent the time in writing

letters : “ *Wrote to Simpson, to Gov. B., to Purd, to Hope, to Capt. Froud, and to Mar.* ” We have been able to identify almost all the people indicated there by Conrad. With regard to *Simpson*, it very conceivably refers to the shipowners of Port Adelaide, Henry Simpson & Sons, to whom the cargo boat “ *Otago*, ” which he commanded eighteen months previously, belonged. *Purd* is certainly the Captain Purdey whose acquaintance he had made some time previously. *Hope* stands for Mr. G. F. W. Hope his old friend, to whom he later dedicated “ *Lord Jim*. ” Captain Froud was at that time Secretary of the London Shipmasters’ Society. As for *Mar* this abbreviation most likely means his aunt, Mme. Marguerite Poradowska.

The diary shows us that on June 28th he left Matadi with Mr. Harou and a convoy of thirty-one men. We saw previously that he had journeyed from Bordeaux together with this same Harou. This Harou was a former Agent of the Public Services of the Independent State of the Congo. A certain Harou (Victor, Eugène, Julien), Belgian officer—apparently the same man—figures in the first list of the “ *Ordre de l’Etoile Africaine*, ” awarded January 16th, 1889. (The name of Harou is also found with that of Nève and Braconnier amongst the Belgian officers who had founded the station of Vivi, with Stanley, in 1880, on the other shore of the Congo, facing Matadi. ⁽¹⁾) This travelling companion does not seem to have afforded Conrad much satisfaction, not because his character was difficult, but because his bad health added to the inconveniences of the expedition. Conrad will remember it later, when writing “ *Heart of Darkness*. ” “ I had a white companion too—not a bad chap, but rather too fleshy, and with an exasperating habit of fainting on the hot hillsides, miles away from the least bit of shade or water. ” ⁽²⁾

(1) See “ *Mouvement Géographique*, ” May 4th, 1890—“ *Bulletin Officiel de l’Etat Ind. du Congo*, ” March, 1889.

(2) “ *Heart of Darkness*, ” p. 71.

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For this journey from Matadi to Kinchassa, Conrad travelled by the caravan trail, still used to-day. Nearly as far as Congo de Lemba it followed the exact line of the present railway, then not in existence. In order to reach Congo de Lemba it is first necessary to cross the mountain range of Palaballa, and we see from notes in the "Diary" for the dates Sunday (29th) and Monday (30th of June), that this ascent was very tiring. This is perhaps not very surprising when we read in Alexandre Delcommune's *Vingt Années de Vie Africaine*: "I will not describe the long and fatiguing stages of the caravan route, immensely long paths whose numerous twists and turns circuiting the hills, or the clambering of their abrupt slopes, lengthened by one-third the distance of 400 kilometres, which, as the crow flies, separate Matadi and Leopoldville," or again the following, from a pamphlet by Captain Albert Thys, *Au Congo et au Kassai*:—

"When one arrives at Palaballa, sweating, panting, with exhausted limbs, the words, no doubt nearly all the same, spring to one's lips: 'What a dog's country.'"

Conrad and Harou made part of the expedition in the company of two Danish officers who left them shortly after reaching a Protestant mission at Banza-Manteka, which still exists to-day, but consisting then of only three white men—three American missionaries—according to the census of 1890. ⁽¹⁾

From Congo de Lemba the track, which bore towards the west, turns north, in order to draw nearer the course of the river to which it runs parallel for the greater part of the way. This track crosses a large number of streams and rivers, some of which are mentioned in Conrad's diary, but often under names which differ considerably from those officially adopted later. ⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ See "Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo," 1890.

⁽²⁾ Thus on July 3rd mention is made: "At 10 passed R. Lukungu,

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It is interesting to follow what the short, crisp notes of the diary have become in "Heart of Darkness." Under July 3rd, the following note is found: "Met an Officer of the State inspecting. A few minutes afterwards saw at a camping place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? horrid smell," which became in "Heart of Darkeness": "Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive—not to say drunk—was looking after the upkeep of the road, he declared. Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle aged negro, with a bullet hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement." (1)

Similarly, an entry on July 4th: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose at night when the moon rose heard shouts and drumming in distant villages," became: "Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff by his side. A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive and wild—and perhaps with a profound sound of bells in Christian country." (2)

On the morning of July 4th they arrived at Manyanga where the track joins the shore of the Congo, only to leave it again for an easterly direction. To the fatigue of the route, the

and at 10. 30 camped on the Mpwe R." A River Lukungu, between the Lunionzo and Kuvilu rivers, does in fact figure on the maps of 1910 and is marked on the 1924 maps under the name of Luba. And the River Mpwe is shown on maps ulterior to Conrad's journey, under the name of Lupwa. Similarly, we find on July 5th, "Stopped at Manyamba." This must refer to a village marked on the maps as Mouembe or Mukimbunga.

(1) "Heart of Darkness," p. 71.

(2) "Heart of Darkness," *id.*

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indisposition of Harou, the mosquitoes, the heat of the day and the coldness of the nights, were added the discussion with the carriers, who had to be renewed several times before the end of the journey. How happy were the travellers to rest a fortnight at Manyanga, from July 8th-25th. They were very amiably received, says Conrad in his diary, by Messrs. Heyn and Jaeger. We know nothing of the latter, but Reginald Heyn was an Englishman, at that time Manager of Transports of the Société du Haut-Congo. He died shortly after, on June 1st, 1892, at Saint-Paul de Loanda.

Two days after they left Manyanga, they strayed a little from the usual track in order to pass by the Mission of Suldi. Conrad notes: "Hospitable reception by Mrs. Comber. All the mission absent. The looks of the whole establishment eminently civilised and very refreshing to see after the lots of tumbled down hovels in which the State and Company agents are content to live."

This establishment sheltered a young couple; one, the Rev. Comber, had been in the Congo for eight or ten years. Camille Coquilhat, the Belgian explorer, alludes to him frequently already in 1882 in his book *Sur le Haut-Congo*, which appeared in 1888. As a matter of fact, Miss Anne Smith, of Willingham, had married the missionary of the Baptist Mission, Percy Comber, of Kennington, at Matadi, two months previously. As regards the Rev. Bentley, whom Conrad also mentions, and says that he will not meet him because he was away in the south with his wife, he evidently refers to Mr. and Mrs. Bentley, who directed the Mission of Lautété.

Conrad scarcely imagined on that day, July 27th, that whilst he was in the heart of Africa, Dominic Cervoni, the Corsican sailor who had initiated him to the art of the sea in the seventies, died at Luri (Corsica), at the age of fifty-six; a personality who served later as successive models for "Nostromo," "Tom Lingard" (*Rescue*), "Attilio" (*Suspense*),

not counting the "Dominics" of *The Arrow of Gold*, and of "Tremolino" (*Mirror of the Sea*).

The expedition was continued in somewhat dismal and cold weather, the only events being the company of an agent, Mr. Heche (more probably Stache) for one day, the meeting of another of the Company's agents who was being taken back ill to Matadi, or that of a skeleton attached to a stake, and the grave of a white man—"Heap of stones in the form of a cross—no name." In the last days of July Harou became quite ill from an attack of fever, which left him fairly quickly, but it was necessary to have him constantly carried in a hammock, and the weight of the sick man made the load heavy, which brought about new difficulties with the carriers. Mutiny nearly broke out. We find a souvenir of it in "Heart of Darkness": "Then he got fever, and had to be carried in a hammock slung under a pole. As he weighed sixteen stone I had no end of rows with the carriers. They jibbed, ran away, sneaked off with their loads in the night—quite a mutiny. So, one evening, I made a speech in English with gestures, not one of which was lost to the sixty pairs of eyes before me, and the next morning I started the hammock off in front all right." (1)

Two days after this scene the expedition reached Nselemba and it was probably on the evening of August 1st, or the morning of the 2nd, that, after thirty-five days (of which nineteen had been steady marching) from Matadi, Joseph Conrad reached Kinchassa, the registration port of the Upper Congo fleet. The firm had installed a dockyard there for building, or rather for assembling. It was there the assembling took place of the hulls of the boats sent from Europe in single parts, transported on men's backs from Matadi to Pool, and it was there also that any damage was repaired. When Joseph

(1) "Heart of Darkness," p. 71.

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Conrad arrived, the ship which had been allotted to him was being repaired; it had been sunk a few days previously, as Conrad gives us to understand in his "Diary" (July 29th) and in "Heart of Darkness." We find an official account of it in the *Mouvement Géographique*: "Recent times have not been favourable to navigation on the upper reaches of the Congo. Various accidents placed several steamers of the fleet in danger. The "Florida," with the Managing Director, M. Delcommune, on board, went aground on leaving Pool. The ss. "Roi des Belges" immediately came to its rescue, refloated it, and brought it back to Kinchassa to undergo the necessary repairs." (1)

This accident happened on July 18th, and it was only five days later, on the 23rd, that it was possible to bring the "Florida" back to Kinchassa. Contrary to what Conrad says through Marlow, Captain Korzeniowski did not wait two months while his ship was being repaired. He went on board the "Roi des Belges" on the same day as second in command. Captain Koch, a Dane, who had often travelled this route, undertook to initiate him into the difficulties and dangers of fresh water navigation. Arriving at Kinchassa on August 2nd, he left the very next day, and this is shown by the heading of the manuscript of the second of his notebooks: "Up-river book, commenced 3rd August, 1890, ss. 'Roi des Belges.'"

Immediately on his arrival at Kinchassa he reported to the man whom Marlow calls the Manager, and who was no other than M. Camille Delcommune, whose name we have just mentioned. In reality he was only acting Vice-Manager at the time, whilst the question of Manager was still unsettled, this post being entrusted shortly after to an Englishman,

(1) "Mouvement Géographique": September 21st, 1890, and in "Heart of Darkness," p. 72. The steamer, "Roi des Belges," built in Belgium in 1887, had been transported in separate parts, then assembled at Kinchassa, and floated on March 17th, 1888.

Expedition." It is Camille Delcommune that Joseph Conrad describes in "Heart of Darkness" as follows: "My first interview with the Manager was curious. He did not ask me to sit down after my twenty-one mile walk that morning. He was commonplace in complexion, in features, in manner, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold, and he could certainly make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe. . . . He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts—nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust—just uneasiness—nothing more. . . . He had no genius for organising, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill." (1)

The physical description of Camille Delcommune does tally with his photographs, but there are some inexactitudes in the relation of facts concerning him. (2) Camille Delcommune arrived in the Congo, not as a boy, but during the last days of 1883; he had been in the service of the French firm, Daumas et Cie, and had only taken work with the Société du Haut-Congo very recently, in the beginning of 1890. In spite of Major Parminter, former Director of the "Sandford Exploring

(1) "Heart of Darkness," pp. 73-74.

(2) Camille Delcommune, born at Rethel, of Belgian parents, on June 30th, 1859, left for the Congo in December, 1883, for service with the firm of Daumas. Returned to Belgium in 1889. Left Lisbon for the Congo, March 6th, 1890. Assistant Manager of the Société du Haut-Congo in Africa, March 1st, 1890. Manager in 1892. Died at Kinchassa, December 26th, 1892 (*Congo Illustré*, second year, No. 5, February 26th, 1893, it contains also a portrait of Camille Delcommune.)

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the last assertion of this rather unflattered portrait, Camille Delcommune died a short time later of hematuric fever, December 26th, 1892, at Kinchassa, just after he had been appointed Manager.

It is not for us to say to what extent the portrait is morally that of Camille Delcommune; all I can say is that Conrad, who was the most generous man that I have ever known, felt, even to his last days, a very strong contempt, or I should even say, a persistent repugnance concerning this man. Many a time Joseph Conrad entertained me with his reminiscences of the Congo, and I greatly regret not to have made any notes. But that which remains most vivid is, on the one hand, the scenery of a river, vast as a sea and scattered with tree stumps, rocks and sandbanks, which the great writer was equally clever in making his listener visualise, whether by word or by pen, and, on the other hand, the hostile, displeasing face of Camille Delcommune, whom he never named without adding some adjective. During the last years of his life, when it pleased him to revive tenderly the memories of his vagabond days, he showed no tenderness for the "pilgrims" (as he calls them in "Heart of Darkness") he had been associated with in the Congo, and especially not for that particular one.

→ The short time he remained at Kinchassa would not have allowed Joseph Conrad to form any connections there, even if he had not guarded against so doing; nevertheless, in order to show to what extent, even to the smallest detail, "Heart of Darkness" usually corresponds to the reality, the following example can be quoted. Marlow relates that he met there "a first-class agent, young, gentlemanly, a bit reserved, with a forked little beard and a hooked nose. . . . The business entrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks—so I had been informed—but there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a

year—waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know what—straw maybe. . . .” (1)

These lines become remarkably clear when compared with the following paragraph taken from the *Mouvement Géographique* of November 2nd, 1890 :—

THE BRICKYARDS OF KINCHASSA.

“The Société du Haut-Congo have made provision and taken the necessary steps for its branch at Kinchassa, headquarters for the Pool district, to be equipped shortly with suitable accommodation for housing its staff and warehousing its merchandise. M. Deligne, an expert, was sent there several months ago with the necessary stock of tools, and already now a rapidly-installed brickyard is in full function.” ← Shorten

The name of this young aristocrat was Deligne, as Marlow says, although he was evidently not a descendant of the prince of the same name. Regarding Conrad's journey on the Upper Congo, from Kinchassa to Stanley Falls, we have two equally sure sources of information on this subject; one, the *Mouvement Géographique*, in which we find these two paragraphs under different dates :—

“The ss. ‘Roi des Belges,’ of the Société du Haut-Congo, left Pool on August 4th, having on board M. Camille Delcommune, Assistant Manager, steamer Captains Koch and Conrad, Agents Keyaerts, Rollin and van der Heyden, mechanic Gossens. The boat was making for the Falls. On the 26th it had reached the confluence of the Oubangi.” (2)

“M. Camille Delcommune, Assistant Manager of the Société du Haut-Congo, has just completed a journey to

(1) “Heart of Darkness,” p. 77.

(2) *Mouvement Géographique*, November 2nd, 1890. It is worth noting that the name of Keyaerts, one of the agents who made this journey, was barely modified by Conrad, *Kayerts* being one of the characters in “An Outpost of Progress.”

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Stanley Falls with so much rapidity that the circumstance is worthy of mention. He left Kinchassa on August 4th, on board the ss. 'Roi des Belges,' towing two lighters and two native cutters. He arrived at the Falls on September 1st, that is, twenty-eight days after his departure from Stanley Pool."⁽¹⁾ (The other is the admirable description which forms the greater part of "Heart of Darkness." Everything that Marlow describes there is evidently the direct reflection of scenes, apprehensions, worries, impressions, recollections of Captain Korzeniowski on board this little flat-bottomed fifteen-ton steamer;) vessel which might also have deserved the homage of a few pages in that touching book, *The Mirror of the Sea*, in which Conrad administered loving justice to all boats and their crews, through the medium of those boats and crews which were his during the twenty years of his sea life. But the "Roi des Belges" was only a steamer, and did not brave the oceans; it dragged itself lamely along in fresh waters, always under risk of running aground, and yet, although Conrad has not given her as fine a part as "Tremolino," for example, who was hardly any bigger, at times in Marlow's story one feels all the captain's affection for "that little begrimed steamer, hugging the bank against the stream, which crept like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico."⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ This voyage, considered then something of a record, left Conrad with the impression of an interminable journey, for Marlow says in "Heart of Darkness," page 92: "It was just two months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz station."

⁽²⁾ Curiously enough, of all the steamers of the Upper Congo fleet, the *Roi des Belges* is the most often reproduced in the Belgian reviews of the day. One finds a photograph of it in the "Congo Illustré" (3rd year, No. 3, March 15th, 1892), one on the first page of the *Mouvement Géographique* of November 15th, 1891. The crew is photographed on it, and it is quite possible that Conrad was one of the two people seen with a solar topi. There is also another photograph in Al. Delcommune's book, *Vingt ans de Vie Africaine*, p. 156, Brussels, 1921.

There is even a third piece of evidence which gives us, failing a more precise description of Conrad's ascent of the river, or of his stay at Stanley Falls, an echo of the impressions he felt on this spot of the earth, and the feeling of solitude due not only from finding himself surrounded by the mysterious silence of the "Dark Continent," but even more, because, between the white men who accompanied him and himself, there was not that feeling of solidarity, that faithfulness to a few very simple and tacitly accepted principles which had, for fifteen years, been his safeguard and his pride. This evidence can be found in the very fine essay, entitled "Geography and Some Explorers": "One day, putting my finger on a spot in the very middle of the then white of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there. My chum's chaffing was perfectly justifiable. I myself was ashamed of having been betrayed into mere vapouring. Nothing was further from my wildest hopes. Yet it is a fact that, about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little stern-wheel steamboat I commanded lay moored to the bank of an African river.

"Everything was dark under the stars. Every other white man on board was asleep. I was glad to be alone on the deck, smoking the pipe of peace after an anxious day. The subdued thundering mutter of the Stanley Falls hung in the heavy night air of the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo, while no more than ten miles away, in Reshid's Camp, just above the Falls, the yet unbroken power of the Congo Arabs slumbered uneasily. Their day was over. Away in the middle of the stream, on a little island nestling all black in the foam of the broken water, a solitary light glimmered feebly, and I said to myself with awe, 'This is the very spot of my boyish boast.'

"A great melancholy descended on me. Yes, this was the very spot. But there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of enormous wilderness, no great haunting

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memory, but only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper "stunt" and the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration. What an end to the idealised realities of a boy's daydreams! I wondered what I was doing there, for indeed it was only an unforeseen episode, hard to believe in now, in my seaman's life. Still, the fact remains that I have smoked a pipe of peace at midnight in the very heart of the African continent, and felt very lonely there." (1)

(1) "Last Essays," pp. 24-25.

THE precision with which details are reported by Marlow in "Heart of Darkness," and the proofs established regarding their authenticity, makes one think that the principal character of this story, the one who (together with the scenery) is the object and soul of the story, was not merely an imagined creation and a kind of symbol, but rather, if not a literal copy, at least a sketch of a real person, modified, enlarged to the needs of artistic effect, but substantially true to reality.

By studying carefully certain peculiarities in Joseph Conrad's work, I had noticed that most of his characters, if they corresponded to people who had really existed, retained their true names, or only very slightly modified. It happens, too, that Conrad carries into his story some person he has known, together with his individuality, appearance and name, someone who did not play the part assigned to him, but who *might have* played it.

Thus a conversation I had with Captain Craig, Conrad's former captain on board the "Vidar," showed me the strict accuracy of the characters and names in *Almayer's Folly*: again in *Youth*, the writer left Captain Beard and Second Lieutenant Mahon their true names and appearance; on the other hand, he gives to the principal character in "Typhoon" the name and appearance of Captain McWhir, who had been his captain in 1887 on board the "Highland Forest," and who would have been *capable* of taking this part. Again, in *Youth*, he alludes to a shipowner whom, he says, "was called 'Wilmer or Wilcox,'" and whose name in reality was Wilson. Without piling up examples, let me say that I soon became absolutely convinced that the name of Kurtz, if it was not the actual name of the real person, had not been chosen lightly, and that it must have a marked resemblance with his true name. The "Mouvement Géographique" of July 20th, 1890, placed before me the following information:—

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"M. Cloetens has taken over the direction of the Kinchassa branch, M. Heyn at Manyanga, Mr. Gosse at Matadi, Mr. Engeringh at Louebo, Mr. Mitchells at the Equator, and Mr. Klein at the Falls."

This last piece of information is more than significant. At the beginning of "Heart of Darkness" Marlow says to his interrogators:—

"You ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation. . . ." ⁽¹⁾

⇒ (Marlow's story tells us in addition that it was on board the boat he commanded that he was present at Kurtz' death. To an enquiry which I made at the Société du-Haut-Congo about Klein (of whom, strangely enough, no mention is made at that time in the *Mouvement Géographique*), I received the following exceedingly convincing reply: "Klein, Georges Antoine: French, engaged as commercial agent. Left for the Congo, December 23rd, 1888. Died September 21st, 1890, on board the steamer 'Roi des Belges' during a voyage. Death due to the results of dysentery. Interred at Chumbiri (Bolobo)."

One could not presume, without explicit proof, the complete resemblance between Kurtz and Klein, but it is beyond a doubt, knowing the psychological process of Conrad, that between these two persons, one real and the other imaginary, there was more than a simple resemblance of name.)

It appears that the object of the journey by the "Roi des Belges" was, as Marlow says, to relieve Kurtz-Klein of his post, for the little steamer did not remain long at the Falls. Arriving on September 1st, we know from other sources that she returned to Kinchassa on the 24th of the same month. If on the up journey Captain Korzeniowski—contrary to what Marlow says in "Heart of Darkness"—was only acting as mate, it is

(1) "Heart of Darkness," p. 51.

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certainly in the capacity of Captain that he brought the steamer back from Stanley Falls to Pool. I have, in fact, in my possession, a letter of which the following is a translation :—

*Société Anonyme Belge pour le
Commerce du Haut-Congo.*

*Stanley Falls,
September 6th, 1890.
Monsieur Conrad Korzeniowski,
Captain.*

I beg herewith to ask you to take command of the ss. "Roi des Belges" from this date until the recovery of Captain Koch.

*Believe me, etc.,
(Signed) Camille Delcommune.*

Thus it is solely due to Captain Koch's illness that Conrad was given command, and this fact explains to a certain extent what followed. It is possible that the 6th was the date of departure from the Falls. In any case the date of Klein's interment (September 21st) corresponds with that of the ship's passage to Bolobo. Three days later he returned to his port of registration, Kinchassa: period of the only fresh water navigation carried out by Conrad.

A simple reading of "Heart of Darkness," when one knows the strict agreement between the story and that period of Conrad's life, is sufficient to show to what extent Captain Korzeniowski's relations with his employers had rapidly become cold, and even strained. The disappointment of the former, his conviction that it was intended to keep him as a subordinate, and that in the Congo he would not be able to obtain the promises made to him in Brussels, his general discontent in face of the point of view and mind of these traffickers had not needed the meeting with Kurtz-Klein, meeting which Marlow says "seemed to throw a kind of light on all things around me and on my thoughts," in order to

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declare itself. Even before he left Kinchassa to ascend the river, he had unburdened himself to his uncle concerning his first deceptions. The latter's answer shews this clearly :—

It is three days since I received your letter from Stanley Pool. . . . I see that you are very incensed against the Belgians who are unscrupulously exploiting you. Admit that this time nothing obliged you to put yourself in the hands of the Belgians. "Tu l'as voulu, tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin". . . . If you had minded my opinion on all this business you would have understood from our conversation that I was not very enthusiastic about your plan. In my quality of a Polish gentleman I have always preferred to be more certain and less brilliant, rather than more brilliant and less certain. . . . In breaking your contract you would expose yourself to expense and the risk of being taxed with unsteadiness, which could harm you later in your career. ⁽¹⁾

The advice of his uncle, which certainly could not have reached him until long afterwards, was not necessary to make him consider the adventure on which he had so unluckily entered, with tenacity. Although on several occasions he had attacks of fever, and even an attack of dysentery at the Falls, he did not yet want to give up.

A passage in "Heart of Darkness" alludes to the arrival at Kinchassa of an expedition which Conrad depicts with much irony, and gives it the still more ironic name of Eldorado Exploring Expedition. "Our Manager's uncle," says Marlow, "was chief of the party." This expedition corresponds also to reality. It was the Katanga Expedition, under the command of Alexandre Delcommune (elder brother, not uncle, of the Manager). The expedition arrived at Pool, not before Conrad's departure for the Falls, but on his return, during the first days

⁽¹⁾ Letter from Thadée Bobrowski to Joseph Conrad, December 14th, 1890.

of October, ⁽¹⁾ and it left Pool on October 13th, and Conrad had ample time to see, hear and study its members. As a matter of fact his portrait of Alexandre Delcommune is not more flattering than that of his brother: "In exterior he resembled a butcher in a poor neighbourhood, and his eyes had a look of sleepy cunning. He carried his fat paunch with ostentation on his short legs, and during the time his gang infested the station spoke to no one but his nephew. You could see those two roaming about all day long with their heads close together in an everlasting confab." ⁽²⁾

But "Heart of Darkness" does not reveal that at one time Conrad hoped to command one of the boats of this expedition, the famous "Florida," allotted to him and which sunk, or nearly so, shortly before his arrival in the preceding July, and which had just been repaired. He wrote a letter on this subject to his cousin, Mme. Tyska, the very day he returned to Stanley Pool:—

I am very busy with preparations for a new expedition on the River Kassai. I shall probably leave Kinchassa in a few days for several months, perhaps for more than ten months. Do not be surprised, therefore, if you do not hear from me during such a long time. ⁽³⁾

The chief of the expedition, Alexandre Delcommune, did not arrive at Kinchassa until about the middle of October. During this time the disagreement between Camille Delcommune and Conrad must have deepened; all hope of understanding was lost, and apparently Camille Delcommune persuaded his

⁽¹⁾ "Mouvement Géographique," No. of November 2nd, 1890.

⁽²⁾ "Heart of Darkness," p. 87. Alexandre Delcommune, born at Namur, October 6th, 1855. Left for Africa in 1873. Directed the factory, then the station at Boma (1883-4). Explored Kassai, Kwango, Lukenya, Sankunu. Chief of the Katanga Expedition (1890-2). ("Congo Illustré," No 16, July 17th, 1892.) Alexandre Delcommune died August 7th, 1922.

See also Alex. Delcommune, "Vingt Années de Vie Africaine," Vol. II, pp. 7 and foll.

⁽³⁾ Letter handed me by Mme. Tyska herself.

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brother, if any persuasion was necessary, not to give Conrad command of the steamer which was to convey the expedition. The health of the captain was already badly undermined. It was only by an effort of his will, and, one might even say, with the courage of despair, that he wished to leave again; a tenacity in his character which all through Conrad's life shows itself, both in his sea and his literary career.

We have no direct evidence of the causes of his rupture with Camille Delcommune, but we have an indirect one of the greatest value; it is a letter addressed by a cousin of Conrad's on November 29th, 1890, from Lublin (Poland) to the Director of the Société du Haut-Congo in Brussels, and which contains the following passages:—

. . . . I received a letter from Mr. Conrad Korzeniowski himself, who has just returned from Stanley Falls after two months' navigation on the up-river. He tells me that his health is greatly affected, and he feels utterly demoralized. Further, the steamer of which he is to take command will not be ready before June, perhaps, and the Director, M. Delcommune, told him plainly that he was not to expect either promotion, or an increase in his salary, as long as he will be in the Congo. He also added that the promises made in Europe do not bind him in any way as long as they are not in the contract, and the promises which you were kind enough to make him are indeed not stated in the contract.

Mr. Korzeniowski's position, therefore, is as false as it can be, which is aggravated by these fevers and dysentery, which have greatly weakened him. Mr. Korzeniowski's family is naturally worried to hear this news; we all hoped that he would be able to stand the climate, but another voyage might destroy his health for always. You can understand that we are all very anxious, and that is why the family has asked me to write to you for advice so that we may know how to get this poor young man out of this dreadful position.

There is some means, which Mr. Conrad submitted himself in his letter, asking me to speak to you about it (as he thinks I am already

back in Brussels). It appears that the Cie. Commerciale du Congo (or another affiliated firm) owns a steamer which makes the trip between Banana and Antwerp. It is even said that this society owns several other steamers.

If Mr. Conrad could obtain the command of one of these steamers it would mean that the solution of the problem is ready found, as at sea there will be no more fever nor dysentery. He has asked me, therefore, to beg you to kindly submit his name for the command of one of these steamers which starts from Antwerp. He adds that if he were called back for this purpose he would be prepared to bear himself the expenses of the return voyage. . . . It is sad to think that a capable man such as Mr. Conrad Korzeniowski, who has been used to commanding steamers for fifteen years, should be reduced to this subordinate position, and should be exposed to such fatal disease.

You seemed to have taken an interest in Mr. C. Korzeniowski, and during my stay in Brussels I was able to form an opinion of your kindness, and I hope that you will not withdraw your support, but that, on the contrary, you will advise him as to the steps he should take." (1)

It is apparent from this letter that the chief reason of Conrad's discontent was Delcommune's refusal to entrust him with the command of a ship, and the fixed intention of the former to keep him in a subordinate position in spite of the promises made to him in Brussels. On the other hand, it is quite sure that Conrad would not have left Europe, where he had the hope of finding a command, in order to be second in a mean twopenny-halfpenny steamer.

The decision taken on the arrival of Alexandre Delcommune not to entrust the command of the "Florida" to Conrad was the last blow to his resistance.(2) On October 19th he decided to abandon everything, and return to Europe; there only

(1) Letter communicated by the Société du Haut-Congo.

(2) The command of the "Florida" was given to a captain Carlier: the same name was given by Conrad to one of the two wretched "heroes" of "An Outpost of Progress."

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remaining this small hope of commanding a sea vessel plying between Antwerp and Banana. Some weeks later, when he was about to reach Europe, his uncle, Thadée Bobrowski, wrote to him on December 27th, 1890 :—

On the 24th I received your letter dated October 19th, from Kinchassa, which informs me of the unfortunate end of your expedition to the Congo and your return to Europe. Mme. Marguerite (Poradowska) informed me also of it from Lublin, where she heard it through the Director of the Company, to whom she had written for news of you.

. . . . Although you assure me that the first sea breeze will give you back your health, I found your writing so changed—which I attribute to fever and dysentery—that since then my thoughts are not at all happy. I never hid from you that I was not partisan to your African project. I remained faithful to my principle to leave everybody to be happy in their own way.

See a specialist on tropical diseases immediately, for our doctors here know nothing on the subject, and I have not even the possibility of telling you to come and rest here.

Tell me also the state of your finances, so that perhaps I may help you to the extent of my means.

Nothing is known of the conditions by which Joseph Conrad's return was brought about. He must have left Kinchassa latest at the beginning of November, since he was at Matadi on December 4th, and it was in a native craft that he journeyed from Kinchassa to Leopoldville, as is indicated in this passage from "A Personal Record": ". . . A good many of my other properties, infinitely more valuable and useful to me, remained behind through unfortunate accidents of transportation. I call to mind, for instance, a specially awkward turn of the Congo between Kinchassa and Leopoldville—more particularly when one had to take it at night in a big canoe with only half of the proper number of paddlers. I failed in being the second white man on record

drowned at that interesting spot through the upsetting of a canoe. The first was a young Belgian officer, but the accident happened some months before my time, and he, too, I believe, was going home—not, perhaps, quite so ill as myself—but still he was going home. I got round the turn more or less alive, though I was too sick to care whether I did or not, and, always with “*Almayer’s Folly*” amongst my diminishing baggage, I arrived at that delectable capital Boma, where, before the departure of the steamer which was to take me home I had the time to wish myself dead over and over again with perfect sincerity.”⁽¹⁾

He did not reach Europe until the beginning of January. The immediate consequence of this journey to the Congo was—as Conrad says himself—“a long, long illness, and a very sad convalescence.” After having remained for weeks in a London hospital, it was only at the end of March he could leave his bed, and then only to go, from May 21st to June 14th, and follow a treatment at the Hydrotherapic Institute, of Champel, near Geneva.

(Joseph Conrad’s health showed the effects of this African expedition all his life. He suffered from attacks of fever and gout which transformed his life into an intermittent martyrdom, and his correspondence into a long and courageous lamentation. But, on the other hand, one is justified in thinking that this journey to the Congo, and its deplorable consequences, gave us the great writer who has enriched the literature of our time by several masterpieces.

One of his oldest friends, Mr. Edward Garnett, repeated to me that one day Conrad had told him: “Before the Congo I was only a simple animal.” He wished to convey that during the first fifteen years of navigation he had lived almost without noticing it, led away by the fire of his temperament,

(1) *A Personal Record*, p. 14.

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drawn by an almost unconscious desire for adventure, without ever reflecting on the reasons for his activity or that of anyone else. By immobilising him, reducing his physical sphere of action, confining him during long months, the illness contracted in the Congo obliged him to have recourse within himself, forced him to evoke memories, of which, in spite of his thirty-three years, his life was already extraordinarily filled, and to take their measure in human value and literary possibilities.

As has already been said, it was just before his departure for the Congo that the literary vocation, which had lain dormant in Joseph Conrad since the years of his solitary childhood, first showed itself. Amongst the luggage which he had taken to Stanley Falls was a notebook of several hundred pages which he nearly lost on the return journey, and which was no other than the first seven chapters of *Almayer's Folly*. It, therefore, cannot be said it was the Congo that aroused this latent literary talent, but it is the Congo, and its grievous results, that definitely fixed his destiny and placed the sad weight of his illness in the balance on the side of the writer, when the sailor was still struggling with the former.)

Until 1898, that is to say, until after he had written *Almayer's Folly*, *The Outcast of the Islands*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Tales of Unrest*, Conrad still thought of going to the sea again. He took steps to obtain a command—he thirsted for the wide spaces which for twenty-five years had been his domain—but it was both with longing and mistrust that he wished for the sea. It was not that the seductions of a literary life were of a nature to retain him; he neither expected profit nor glory from it; he merely hoped for a modest living. But he knew that henceforth he was menaced at every moment by illness, and in spite of his indomitable energy, of this fighting capacity which appears in all the pages of his books, he no longer felt sure enough of himself to take up again that incessant battle against his old and pitiless enemy, the sea

IN THE CONGO

In spite of two journeys in 1892 and 1893, made on board the "Torrens," from London to Australia, it can be said that Africa killed the sailor in Conrad and strengthened the writer. In this respect the chapter of the Congo remains a prime episode in Conrad's extraordinary life.

It is perhaps not quite correct to say, like Mr. Galsworthy, "that the lingering Congo fever which dogged his health fastened a deep, fitful gloom over his spirit." This gloom was in the depths of his nature, he had breathed it from the day of his birth; it was not only personal melancholy, but national; it was the feeling, at the same time courageous and despairing, of Poland at one of the darkest moments of its history. And this melancholy could only have become more pronounced in contact with distant scenes, and in the solitude of the sea. But if it did not create in him this profound melancholy, the Congo made it rise from the depths of his being, and, without any doubt, contributed in spreading over his work that magnificent wave of bitterness, which, coming from the very heart of human darkness, flows on like a large river, or is precipitated like a cataract, carrying with it to the ends of dream-world all the strength of a restless soul and a generous mind.

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